

TRACK OF THE SHALLOP

By Gershom Bradford

It is the height of brashness for me to fly in the face of accepted Pilgrim history. But I am convinced that a correction is needed in this dramatic episode of Dec. 18, 1620. With the indulgence of the *Duxbury Clipper*, I shall present my case:

The last historian to adhere to the theory that the prevailing storm was a southeaster and that the shallop entered by way of the Gurnet was the late eminent Prof. Samuel Eliot Morison.

The first point to settle is the direction of the wind on that night William Bradford gives us the clue in commenting on the weather at Clark's Island: "About midnight the wind shifted to the northwest and froze hard." To a meteorologist he shows that a low pressure center was off the coast moving in a northerly and easterly course giving the Plymouth area a northeast storm. As the center progressed its anti-clockwise winds turned to the northwest and cold Canada air poured down the back and west side of the depression. The people of Duxbury have and will experience this sequence every winter.

At a luncheon a few years ago I had the opportunity to speak with an eminent meteorologist relating to the weather on that December night. He snapped, "Of course, it was a northeaster," as though impatient with those who contended otherwise. The direction of the wind is the key to the shallop's entrance into Plymouth Harbor.

With that point hopefully settled let us place ourselves on the bay side of the Cape a little eastward of Barnstable around noon of Dec. 18, 1620. The "ten leading Pilgrims" at the boat were thoroughly frustrated. They were listening to Robert Coppan the second mate of the *Mayflower*, who had previously been in Plymouth. He told them the place they were looking for lay some 20 miles to the northwestward. Despite worsening weather they struck across Cape Cod Bay. The boat had a broad reach on the starboard tack. As they progressed, the wind and sea became rapidly worse. They were converging on the western shore of the Bay at Manomet Hill.

About the middle of the afternoon, carrying too much sail, with a strong weather helm putting severe stress on the fastenings of the rudder, they gave way. The loss of the rudder required 2 seamen to attempt to steer with 2 oars. This was difficult. Coppan told them to be of good cheer for he saw the harbor, meaning the land falling away to the westward. The land he saw was Manomet Hill jutting out to the northeast in a 2-mile front, Manomet Point to the southeast and Rocky Point to the northwest.

Despite the increasing severity of the storm, they still carried full sail, eager to get in before dark. Steering with oars they were unable to luff quickly to the gusts. They did not. The mast carried away and the sail went overboard. It was recovered with difficulty in their extremely serious situation in which they were nearly "castaways" -- probably on Rocky Point. With oars out and the boat under control they took the easier and seamanlike course of heading off with the wind fair, seas astern and a flood current to favor them. They hung on to the land at a safe distance. Coppan then, completely lost, declared, "Lord have mercy on them for he never saw this place before." That was the end of his usefulness.

Coppan was called a faithless pilot, which was unfair.

He had done them the good service of pointing the way and his

failure to identify Manomet was due to his approaching from the south in low visibility, while on his earlier visit he had come in by the Gurnet 3 miles to the north, lost in the rain and flying spume. The aspect of Manomet is radically in contrast to that of the Gurnet.

The shallop, primarily a sailing craft, was under-powered when under oars. There were only 5 seamen to pull. They could not have kept enough to windward to weather Brown's Bank and make the Gurnet -- had they known it was there -- Coppan being out. Proceeding westward they hoped for a "hole in the beach," as sailors say.

It was a fateful hour for those Pilgrims sitting in their boat as she was swept along that unknown coast in the gathering darkness of the storm. They were supported by the Great Benevolence in whom they had such abiding faith. While Clark and Coppan, the seasoned seamen, finding no shelter, broke under the stress, ordering the boat beached on the breaking lee shore of Warren's Cove.

At this critical moment something extraordinary happened; the seaman at the steering oar mutinously shouted to the oarsmen, "About with her and pull if ye are men." They did nobly, bringing her to the wind, saving them from "being castaway in a cove full of breakers." Warren's Cove is the only one in the area with breakers in a northeast storm. Saquish Cove is then in the lee of the Gurnet serving as an anchorage for fishing vessels since time long past. There are no breakers there in a northeast storm.

There was no remonstrance from Clark at being so surreptitiously deprived of his command. He had completely failed his passengers.

The new pilot fired by confidence in his abilities told the Pilgrims to be of good cheer for he had little doubt that he would land them in safety. He rode the strong current running northward between the beach and Brown's Bank, having its partial lee. It was "very dark and raining sore," which led him to miss the head of Plymouth Beach. However, he was confident that there was land to windward owing to the smooth sea and headed that way, deflected by current, he landed them on Clark's Island.

This is an example of the low status of seamen in that age. Neither Bradford or Winslow recorded a word of commendation for the courageous and able seaman who had rescued them from a fatal disaster -- simply stating what he did. It was faint praise to be called a "lusty" seaman.

I rest my case.